

AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (Currently Amended) A method for packaging a product in a hermetically sealed container having a cup-shaped rigid or semi-rigid body (106) provided with a rim (107) fitted with a closure (124), the method comprising:

[[i]]a) introducing the product into said cup-like shaped body (106);

ii) forming proximate to the rim (107) a confined space (204), said space having at least one gas inlet (134) and at least one gas outlet (112), said space (204) being defined between said body (106) and a closure forming, substantially gas impermeable membrane (200), said confined space being formed adjacent to the rim and at a distance therefrom;

iii) introducing a replacement gas through said inlet (134) into said confined space (204) to replace at least a substantial portion of gas originally contained in the container body (106);

iv) relative displacement of said body (106) and said closure forming member (200) towards each other to bring the

~~closure forming membrane (200) in contact with said rim (107),~~
and

v) ~~hermetically attaching the membrane (200) to the rim to~~
~~form a gas tight seal therebetween.~~

b) placing the container into a holder beneath and
concentrically with a central opening of a spacer member;

c) providing above the rim a flat, closure-forming, gas-
impermeable membrane, said membrane extending between the spacer
member and a pressing plate;

d) relative vertical displacement of the holder and the
spacer member so as to form proximate to the rim a confined
space, said space having at least one gas inlet and at least one
gas outlet, said space being defined by an upper part of the
body, by the closure-forming membrane, by an inwardly facing
surface of the central opening and by a peripheral portion of
the holder, said confined space being formed adjacent to the rim
and at a distance therefrom;

e) introducing a replacement gas through said inlet into
said confined space to replace at least a substantial portion of
gas originally contained in the container body;

f) displacement of said pressing place other to bring the
closure-forming membrane in contact with said rim; and

g) hermetically attaching the membrane to the rim to form a gas-tight seal therebetween.

2. (Original) A method according to Claim 1, wherein said product is a pasty material.

3. (Original) A method according to Claim 1 or 2, wherein said product is a food product.

4. (Currently Amended) A method according to Claim 1, wherein the closure-forming membrane ~~(200)~~ is a plastic film.

5. (Currently Amended) A method according to Claim 1, wherein said confined space ~~(204)~~ is brought in communication with the external atmosphere via the said gas outlet—~~(112)~~.

6. (Currently Amended) A method according to Claim 1, wherein said confined space ~~(204)~~—is brought in communication with a vacuum forming means ~~(604)~~—via the said gas outlet.

7. (Currently Amended) An apparatus for forming a hermetically sealed product-containing container, the container having an essentially cup-like shaped body ~~(106)~~ with rim ~~(107)~~

fitted with a closure—(124); wherein said container is not filled entirely by the product such that a residual space (210) remains between the product and the rim; the apparatus comprising:

- a holder (104) for holding said container body (106);
- a spacer member (130), having a central opening (132),
- a means for ~~brining~~ bringing the spacer member into sealing engagement against the holder and against a flat closure-forming substantially a gas-impermeable membrane (200), the arrangement being such that in the state of sealing engagement the inwardly facing wall of said central opening (132), the container body (106), the holder (104) and the closure-forming membrane (200), define together a confined space (204), said space is adjacent to the rim (107) and at a distance therefrom a peripheral portion of the holder and the closure-forming membrane, define together a confined space, said space is located adjacent to the rim and at a distance therefrom;
 - at least one gas inlet (134) and at least one gas outlet (112) for introducing a replacement gas into said confined space (204), and replacing at least a substantial portion of gas originally contained in the container body (106);
 - a sealing mechanism comprising a displacing arrangement for displacing one or both of said container body

(106)—and said closure-forming membrane (200)—towards one another and attaching them to one another in a gas-tight fashion.

8. *(Currently Amended)* An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said holder (104)—has an opening (108)—for receiving the body (106)—of the container.

9. *(Currently Amended)* An apparatus according to Claim 8, wherein the opening (108)—of the holder (104)—is fitted with an axially projecting skirt (110) for engagement with the rim (107) of the container (106).

10. *(Currently Amended)* An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said gas outlet (112) is formed in the holder (104)—and comprises, through going bores.

11. *(Currently Amended)* An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said gas inlet (134)—is formed in the spacer member (130)—and comprises nozzles for introducing a replacement gas into the confined space (204) a sealed space.

12. *(Currently Amended)* An apparatus according to Claim 7,

wherein said sealing mechanism is capable to bring said closure-forming membrane (200) into sealing engagement with the rim (107) through the central opening (132) of said spacer member (130) provided with means for bringing said closure-forming membrane into sealing engagement with the rim through the central opening of said spacer member.

13. (Currently Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said closure-forming membrane (200) is a continuous ~~film~~ made film, made of a heat-weldable plastic material.

14. (Currently Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 13, comprising a trimming member (180) for trimming edges of the ~~film~~ closure-forming membrane brought into sealing engagement with the rim (107).

15. (Currently Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 10, wherein said gas inlet comprises nozzles (334) made in the spacer member (130) for introducing a replacement gas into the confined space (204) and a bottom surface of said holder (304) is in sealing engagement with a vacuum-forming cup, (604) and wherein said gas outlet is in communication with the vacuum-forming cup.

16. (Currently Amended) An apparatus according to claim 14, in which said sealing mechanism is provided with a heat sealing plate ~~(160)~~ wherein the trimming member ~~(180)~~ and the heat sealing plate are axially displaceable towards the closure-forming membrane ~~(200)~~ through the central opening ~~(132)~~ in the spacer member ~~(130)~~.
